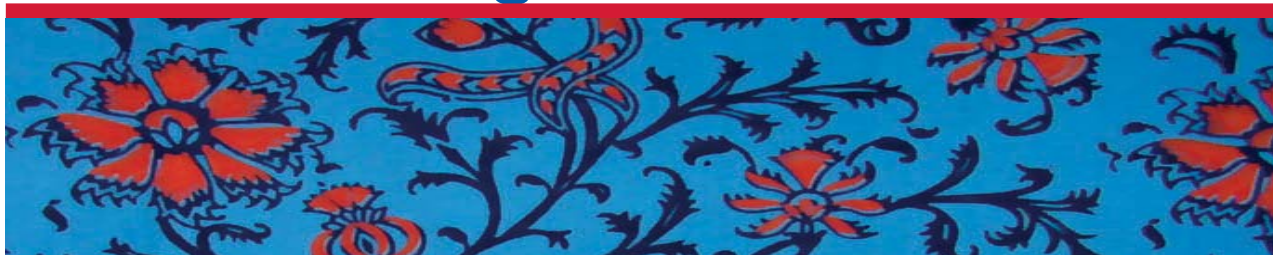




Connect-Bangladesh Newsletter



Issue #10 January 15, 2006

This month, we had visitors: eight American high school students spent three weeks in Bangladesh as part of the LINC Exchange program. The students explored topics of youth leadership, community service and conflict resolution. During their time in Bangladesh, they worked closely with a team of Bangladeshi students who will visit the US later this year.

The Global Connections and Exchange Program's educational activities were also exciting, with lessons on music, international relations, and Bangladeshi history. Almost three hundred teachers and students received basic computer training in December.



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Do you have something you'd like to contribute to the newsletter? Observations, editorials, announcements, suggestions, photos, artwork or philosophical ramblings? We don't really need the latter, but I suppose you could still send it along. Send to:

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Sharing Music

In December, we wrapped up our global lesson on Fashion, and launched a new global lesson called "Sharing Music". No, the lesson was not about the latest way to pirate mp3s on the internet – it was about sharing cultural insights through music. Students in the US and Bangladesh learned about important songs in each other's countries.

A few mp3s did, in fact, change hands during the lesson. But wait – before the record companies start reaching for their lawyers – the students themselves sang and recorded songs which are part of their national heritage. Talented students in Bangladesh sang their national anthem, "Amar Sonar Bangla", and folk songs. Students in both countries then discussed the lesson using the website forum

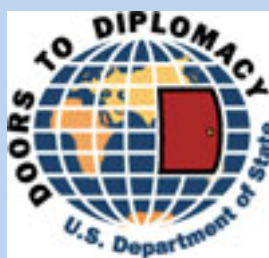


"Popy" from the Safi Uddin Sarker Academy & College in Tongi sings "Salaam Salaam..."

Computer Fundamentals Training

More than three hundred first-time computer users were trained among students, and another two hundred teachers received training in computer fundamentals in Chittagong. In addition, a new Bangla-language tutorial was released to all participating schools in Bangladesh. The tutorial explores search strategies for finding information on the internet.

Doors to Diplomacy



Lead educational teachers from several schools were invited to Dhaka for a full-day training on the Doors to Diplomacy Program, an online collaborative project coordinated by the Global School House (globalschoolhouse.org).

Between now and March, students who participate in the Doors to Diplomacy program will form research teams develop internet-based projects related to themes of international importance. Teams from around the world will compete, and the competition will be intense. We wish good luck to our teams.

Pen Friends

This month, we kicked off the Pen Friends program – a high-tech version of pen pals connecting students in Bangladesh with a network of students in the US, UK, Sweden, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Palestine. In contrast to the Global Lessons, the emphasis in the pen friends program is on creating person-to-person relationships rather than connections between educational institutions or classrooms.

Regional Lessons

Finally, within Bangladesh, students worked on two other regional projects: "Leisure Time" and "Bijoy Dibosh". Leisure time was an informal discussion about hobbies and past times. Bijoy Dibosh means "Victory Day" and the lesson explored the history of Bangladesh's fight for Independence and the long-lasting effects the struggle had on the country.



LINC -- Part One

Last month, we introduced the LINC students: fourteen Bangladeshi and eight American students involved in this year's "Linking Individuals, Knowledge and Culture" exchange program. Both teams formed one or two months before the exchange, but on December 30th, the two teams met each other for the first time. The LINC Exchange is funded by the US Department of State's Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau, as is the Global Connections and Exchange Program.

The Americans left the US two days after Christmas and flew the equivalent of ten time zones to get to Bangladesh. The flight took almost thirty hours, and it is safe to guess that the students spent most of the flight talking rather than sleeping, so it was surprising that they were full of energy when they landed. They were greeted by the Relief International – Schools Online staff and settled in for the evening.

The next day, they went right into action – downtown for shopping. As GCEP students learned last month, there are different clothing customs in Bangladesh. Shorts and tee shirts are out for guys, long sleeved shirts, Punjabis (long robes) and lungis (a wrapped cloth) are in. For young women, Salwar Kamiz are fashionable. Unfortunately, it's hard to walk into a store and pick up an "off the rack" Punjabi or Salwar Kamiz. Being the clever folks that we are, though, we had the students measured by a tailor before they arrived and had some fine fashions for them when touched down. However, we knew that one Salwar Kamiz wouldn't cut it for the three week program, particularly when the students expected to be doing some very hands-on community service. The students and chaperones headed into the Dhanmondi section of the Bangladeshi capital city, Dhaka.

They spent the afternoon shopping, took a paddle boat ride on a local lake, and explored some restaurants. In the afternoon, they visited the Bangladeshi Parliament building – and having seen it



Top: LINC participants Gloria Rosales, Stephanie Horak, Jessica Gutierrez and Jammie Castellanos model their new Salwar Kamiz outfits on the first day of the exchange. Middle: Paddle boats on Dhanmondi Lake, John Hutchinson and Ryan Theimer in the lead, followed closely by Ivan Perez and Bryant Gomez. Bottom: The combined LINC teams -- American and Bangladeshi, plus youth chaperone Stephanie Horak, and our staff members, Caitlin Drewes and Lela Lantz.



The LINC students construct a new community center for a village in Manikganj. Top: Students dig the foundation, pass pans of sand hand-to-hand at the construction site, and tamp down the floor. Bottom: Students paint the bamboo trim and fix it to the beams and roof. Finally, the whole team poses in front of the completed structure.

once, they're unlikely to forget its strangely geometric shape. Afterwards, they visited the Central Shaheed Minar, a monument to Language Martyrs – people who died in 1952 defending people's right to speak their mother language.

The next morning, a convoy set out from the RI-SOL office in Dhaka: three buses of students, plus a car. The vehicles were bound for Manikganj, an area to the north of Dhaka. For the next five days, the students stayed at the

Taking pictures became extremely frustrating today. Pictures don't even begin to tell how life is... I keep finding myself taking pictures and then deleting them because they seem so quaint in comparison to the realities of Bangladesh. The poverty is unlike anything I have ever seen....Before the van even took off there was a sharp rap on the window and an old man with his hand cupped out before him. Nothing could be done for him and we made off in our van to go to the market. Several blocks later I once again I heard a sharp knock on the window and there stood a mother with a mutilated son. The women smiled and held her hand to her mouth begging for food; I have never seen something so raw and close to home like before...The worst part of it all was the fact that it was one of the first beggars I saw so I have always been taught not to be rude and I could not just ignore this woman all together as if she did not exist. ... Perhaps the hardest part about seeing such poverty is contemplating what my life can do to help people who are in such poverty. You cannot see something so intense and not want to do something more....I just want a way to do something more when I get home. Ended the night thinking then praying. Weblog (www.connect-bangladesh.org/blog), **Ryan**, Dec 30, 2005.

While they were exploring, the Bangladesh LINC team arrived in town. By the evening, both groups assembled for dinner. By the end of dinner there was just one group: 22 high school students with the common goal of learning about each other's culture.

Proshika training center in Manikganj, a sprawling, green campus with dormitories and meeting halls sandwiched between a forested area and a series of lakes. Proshika is a Bangladeshi NGO dedicated to helping the poor and promoting a just and equitable society.



Not far from the training center is a village, and students visited the village on their first day. Over the next five days, they would spend their days working on a construction of a community center, and their evenings discussing the project and participating in cultural activities.

Youth leadership and community service are core concepts for the LINC program, and through this community project the LINC high school students experienced both. On the first day, Proshika ran a workshop entitled "Social Awareness and Grassroots Organizing". That evening, RISOL coordinated a discussion on the topic of "ICT and Activism" – or, in human-speak, how to use technology to communicate with people and get things done. ICT means "Information and Communication Technology" and the term is used widely throughout the world, although not so much in the US.

For the next several days, students literally built a community center with their bare hands – they dug the foundation, leveled a floor, worked with a mason to build the brick walls, and painted the bamboo paneling. The project didn't involve bulldozers and cranes – it involved a lot of people working side-by-side, passing buckets of sand from one person to another down a human chain. It was hard work, but fun at times, such as the "stomping party" technique of tamping down a sand under layer before pouring the concrete floor.

One evening's cultural program consisted of a performance by Baul musicians. Bauls are folk musicians, and we dis-

cussed them in the GCEP program in March of last year. They are something of a dying breed in Bangladesh, and we worked with a local group trying to preserve this unique cultural heritage. The next evening was an equally – unique – experience, when the students performed their own acts. Teams combining American and Bangladeshi students wrote skits and musical numbers.



Throughout the stay in Manikganj, students worked in five teams to record the experience using digital video cameras. Aside from having a souvenir of their time in Manikganj, making the short films was an exercise in team work and a way to put the "ICT for Activism" lesson to a practical use.

Over the next year, students participating in the LINC program will perform at least ten hours of community work each month. At least once during this period, each student will make a short documentary about his or her project and will post them to the world wide web for discussion. The student films from Manikganj were a dry run for this aspect of the



Top and Bottom Filmstrips: Scenes from the five student videos produced in Manikganj. The videos can be viewed at on the www.connect-bangladesh.org website. Above, right: Country Director Jack Welch and IT Officer Russell John frantically edit the videos on site.



project. During the last day in Manikganj, our staff frantically edited more than five hours of raw footage into videos of about five minutes apiece. These videos have been placed on our website under the "LINC" menu. Since internet service is much slower in most

parts of Bangladesh than the US, each video was posted in a format suitable for download either via a broadband connection or by slower dial-up modem.

Apparently, our students work quickly. The community center went up with half a day to spare. After the dedication of the center, the students had time for some impromptu games. The afternoon became a mini-track day, with wheelbarrow and three-legged races, egg tosses and a football game (the kind with a little round ball dotted with hexagons, what the Americans tend to call "soccer").

While the American students were still on winter break, the Bangladeshi students had to get back to school – national exams are in March, and the last couple months are important for preparation. Even knowing they would see each other again in four months when the Bangladeshi students visit the US, goodbyes were teary, as students hugged



Top: One of the cultural activities involved the Americans and Bangladeshi youth teaching each other traditional songs. Later, the students performed these songs on "talent night". Middle: Several of the Americans and Bangladeshi participants took part in a football match. Bottom: As a special surprise, we celebrated the birthdays of Shucheta and Rubel during the Manikganj project. Above, right: Students demonstrate their swamp-clearing skills, pulling out vegetation which would otherwise choke the water and kill fish.

each other and traded email addresses. The US students returned to Dhaka with a fresh commitment to community service and some stiff backs. They welcomed a chance to sit down and talk for a while with representatives from some non-government organizations (NGOs) involved in community service including Dushtha Shasthya Kendra and the Rural Health and Development Society. These groups talked about their projects such as helping poor children learn to read, or helping the disabled find employment.

That evening, pairs of students were introduced to host families who had volunteered to "adopt" them for the next five nights. Both the students and families had been oriented in advance about what to expect, so there were few surprises. This home stay

arrangement provided students with an intimate look at Bangladeshi family life in a way that they would never have seen staying in a hotel.

During the day time, students worked with DemocracyWatch, a Bangladeshi organization interested in transforming society towards democratic ideals. Students again worked along side Bangladeshi volunteers performing a number of community-oriented activities, the most memorable of which was cleanup of a swamp.

The students' stay coincided with the Muslim Holy Day of Eid-al-Azha. We discussed the origin and meaning of Eid, including regional differences which were brought to light in November's Global Connection Project on Ramadan and Eid traditions. Students spent three days in Modhupur

I felt very excited once I was able to begin working and I was very pleased with how inviting and happy the village people were to see all of us youth trying to help...I was extremely impressed and proud of how all of the youth were able to work as a team and get the job done efficiently and quickly. Weblog, **Jessica**, January 1, 2006.

...We returned to the worksite...Sarah called me come and help flatten the mud that was being put in the building to make the floor. She gave me the idea of Stomping. I then was able to grab the attention of curious onlookers and convince them to join in. So I taught some of the students some Stomp routines. John was excited but Stomped like a robot which gave everyone a good laugh and encouraged them to try harder. Sarah learned the routine and was so happy that she couldn't stop smiling. Weblog, **Angela**, January 2, 2006.

Yesterday was a very interesting day. I was very pleased with the finished product of the community center. It was such an overwhelming feeling of pride and gratefulness. I was so happy the all the youths were able to work together and accomplish such an incredible task. The village was very beautiful and I am so happy that we can all say that we had part in making that community center. Weblog, **Jessica**, January 4, 2006.

Today was a very sad day, we had to say bye to the Bangladesh students. It hurt a lot to say goodbye to them. Inside I felt like RI had given me brothers and sisters for awhile and then was taking them away from me like nothing had happened. Safi, one of the Bangladeshi boys and Sazu really broke my heart when they were crying, especially since they were crying on my shoulder. Weblog, **Ivan**, January 5, 2006.

The people I am going to miss the most are Haviva, because she was the first person I met and was the only person to learn how to do my stomp the right way. Antu because she is so kind and dedicated a beautiful poem to me. I'm going to miss Ashok because he taught me so much about the Bangla language and had this look of confusion on his face that was priceless. Rubel and Kowsar tried so hard to learn my stomp and that brings them closer to my heart. Overall though, I am going to miss them all. With every ending though, there comes a beginning...today... we started living with our host families. Weblog, **Angela**, January 5, 2006.

How can I begin? ... My family is the best and I really mean it... Although the country isn't the best for tourism the people are very friendly and their culture is so cool. Our baba (host father) is extremely interesting, he likes to talk about his family history... Our host sister Mancholo is really sarcastic and we didn't think that anyone would be, but she understands. She likes to dance and so do I, we also like the same music and we even sang a song together. Mancholo is really good at bargaining...she took Gloria and me shopping and bought us churi which are bracelets in Bangla. Ma, our host mom is very sweet she takes care of us and watches over us all the time. Weblog, **Jammie**, January 6, 2006.

Today we worked with Democracy Watch again...I was glad that I got a chance to...interact more with the Bangladeshi's involved with Democracy Watch...When we got home, we had a lot of visitors we met the cousins and sister-in-laws, which was a bit overwhelming...The best part of tonight was the opportunity to converse more with our host sister, Prokrita. She really opened up with us and it honestly felt like a sister relationship. It was also very helpful to realize that my host sister and I do have many things in common. As each night passes, I am beginning to make more at a connection with my host family. Weblog, **Jessica**, January 7, 2006.

Today was officially our last day with our host family...Tonight was and is very hard for me. I have gotten very attached to my host family and it is really sad to have to say goodbye. It is very sad for me in particular because I have gotten so close with my host sister. I have never had a sister before, but I know that after this trip, and after this week, I have had the best and sweetest sister that I could have had....In the beginning of this program, I never thought that I would fall in love with this country. I am now able to see what Stephanie was talking about, when it comes to challenging your life. I came to this country with fears and expectations, but I honestly don't think I can put how much this trip has impacted me into words...Weblog, **Jessica**, January 9, 2006.

Forest, a quiet area to the northwest of the capital. Most of the people living in Modhupur are not ethnically Bengali, but Sino-Tibetan. While Bangladesh is 90% Muslim, the majority of the Mondhi are Christian; a significant number are Hindu and some retain the animist traditions of their remote ancestors.

The students stayed in a youth hostel near a native village and met with the villagers on several occasions. The villagers told the students about their culture and discussed how it differed from the surrounding Bengali culture which is more influenced from the direction of India than their culture which is closer to Tibetan. Women play a vital role in Mondhi life, as their tribal culture is matrilineal – women are the land owners, only women can inherit property, and women play a role in the tribal economy.



A village house in the Modhupur Forest.

We conducted a workshop on tolerance and conflict resolution, discussing societal issues that have arisen between the Mondhi tribal population and the surrounding Muslim population. We learned that during the liberation war, religious persecution was common, but that since the establishment of Bangladesh, the situation has improved. A more pressing concern for the modern day Mondhi, however, is Forest policy. The Mondhi have lived for innumerable generations in the Modhupur Forest, which is shrinking daily as land is converted to profitable pineapple and banana plantations.

The question of land ownership is a difficult one. How do the Mondhi prove they own the land on which they have lived for generations? Students compared and contrasted the plight of indigenous American and indigenous Bangladeshi groups, each of which have suffered as outsiders have expanded into their territory. The students, chaperones, villagers and members of local non-government organizations explored the relationship between the Mondhi and their neighbors, and discussed methods of conflict resolution – ways to limit the potential for the situation to deteriorate further and eventually bring these two populations together.

After three days in the Forest, the students returned to the crowded and noisy streets of Dhaka once again. They paid a visit to the Bangladesh Center for Development, Journalism, and Communica-

tions and talked with the Center's Joint Director, Mr. Mainul Islam Khan about issues of press freedom. Afterwards, they visited "Old Dhaka", the original streets of Dhaka near the Riverfront. Here they saw the remains of colonial houses, narrow streets, bustling markets and throngs of rickshaws, pedestrians and taxis.

On the last full day, they drove just south of Dhaka to Sonorgaon, an ancient capital of the Bengali region. The students spent several hours at the Folk Museum which has preserved specimens of Bangladesh's past. Early in the British Empire era, Bengal was a major textile producer, both of raw material and finished goods. The fine muslin and rich fabrics of that time were displayed. Next to the museum, a colonial mansion had been converted to a museum showcasing traditional art, musical instruments, handicrafts, and other cultural artifacts.

That evening, Bangladeshi LINC students from the Dhaka area attended a going-away dinner with the American counterparts and all of the staff involved in the LINC exchange. At the end of the dinner there were no good-byes, just "see you in Californias".

Some departing thoughts...

Last week, last couple of days, last day, final hours: it is almost over. Three weeks ago I was having second thoughts about coming to Bangladesh. I never thought that I could adapt to communicating, eating the Bangladeshi food, or washing my clothes by hand. ... I will leave Bangladesh with the memory of the great people living here. I will miss my adventures with everyone. I am grateful for those people that gave me the chance to be here. I am just very grateful. Thanks. Weblog, **Bryant**, January 14, 2006.

What a great week it has been ... Bangladesh (the trip) has motivated me and put pressure on me to take action in my community back home....You could say that the entire trip has changed me from a person that only spent time thinking that he wanted to help to a person that will now take action and so do something about whatever I have in mind to do. What I have learned about Bangladesh is that I should never judge a culture by its cover, and that I should keep any of my comments to myself. I say this because before I learned about the Muslim culture, I made some inappropriate comments and I feel silly now because these comments should have never been said by me...Again, Bangladesh has been an amazing unforgettable experience! Weblog, **Ivan**, January 14, 2006.

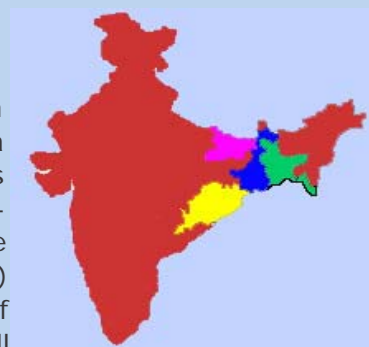
I've thought a lot and since I've been here and it seems that only now I am beginning to see the real purpose of this amazing opportunity. I began to really realize it when I started to think about ways in which I could really help these people the most. After thinking a great deal, I began to think that public awareness is the greatest way to really aid the people of developing countries. By informing and allowing many others to experience the poverty and struggles of another country, one person can change many others and cause them to become avid in wanting to aid other countries. Weblog, **Ryan**, January 14, 2005.

I have learned many things about Bangladesh, about the religions, and their way of life. In the US people don't realize how much they have and don't appreciate what they have. On the other hand, many people half way around the world are the opposite: they don't have the things we take for granted, yet they do appreciate everything they have. I will never forget the friends I made in less than a week; even though I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to connect with them. These are the friendliest people in the world, the most loyal people anyone can ever meet. Weblog, **Jammie**, January 14, 2006.

My trip to Bangladesh is a story to tell. Yes, it is a third world country yet it seems the people don't believe it. Every person here has a job and plays a role in their community. When a person is down, a fellow Bangladeshi will help in their time of need. This country is one big family. Wherever I went, the people always wanted to feed me, give me shelter, and show me their home... Bangladesh is a beautiful country with the friendliest people in the world. This whole journey and experience will be with me for the rest of my life. I shall never forget all the relationships I have built here... Weblog, **John**, January 14, 2006.

English as a Foreign Language Exchange Program

Hot on the heels of the LINC program, we're gearing up to send thirty Indian and Bangladeshi middle school English teachers to the US for a five week program beginning this April. The teachers will be chosen from applicants in three Indian Pradesh or states: Bihar (pink), West Bengal (blue) and Orissa (yellow), as well as all of Bangladesh (green). These teachers will visit Hamline University in Minnesota (below, blue) to participate in a series of seminars and workshops related to the teaching of English. Hamline University (www.hamline.edu) is one of the foremost Universities in the US in the field of Teaching English as a Second Language. The teachers will learn advanced teaching techniques and develop tools which they can share with



their fellow teachers when they return home in May. In addition to classroom learning, these teachers will have an opportunity to work in parallel with American ESL teachers at a number of schools in Minnesota. They will gain not only the practical experience of teaching ESL, but have an opportunity to directly observe the American education system and meet students from the US.

The application process has ended in Bangladesh, but continues in the Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal of India until the end of January. In Bangladesh, we have received more than one hundred applications. During the next month, interviews and standardized English tests will help determine which of these applicants will travel to the US. Check back next month, and we will announce who these finalists are!

GCEP Website Updates



The connect-bangladesh website is the center of the Global Connections and Exchange Program in Bangladesh. It's our main way of coordinating projects and showing off what students have accomplished. Like any website worth its salt, ours is constantly updated. This month, there are a few items worth noting.

In the Student Resources section, we've added two new documents: a guide to A/V

projects and a guide to ICT for Activism. The A/V guide provides some practical information about how to make a project that includes sound or videos. So far, we've concentrated mainly on projects that produce text documents or slide presentations, but why not take full advantage of the technology? The guide was written with Internet Learning Centers in mind, and addresses how to use whatever resources are available to their full advantage. The ICT for Activism Guide discusses the use of technology by youth activists – how to use media resources to make an impact on your society.

Connectivity Team Focus: Caitlin Drewes, Program Officer

Caitlin Drewes is a Program Officer at Relief International - Schools Online, and most of the time, she works in an office in Northern California. Every now and then, however, we put her to work digging ditches in Bangladesh, teaching students in Sri Lanka, and an assortment of other tasks that make it almost impossible to predict what she'll be up to from one week to the next.



Caitlin works with Global Connection and Exchange Programs in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Jordan, Palestine and Tajikistan. She also works with a number of other educational and cultural projects throughout the world which are coordinated by Relief International - Schools Online.

Caitlin is no newcomer to Bangladesh, she worked here as a Peace Corps Volunteer beginning seven years ago, and speaks Bangla fluently. She has been a part of the Global Connections and Exchange Program here since it began in 2004. During last year's Tsunami, when many of our staff were sent to Sri Lanka, she stepped in temporarily as the Country Director for Bangladesh.

Caitlin's background is in international education, and she has had a major role in developing the curriculum and specific lesson plans for students participating in the Global Connections and Exchange Program.

Recruiting US schools and encouraging them to become involved in Global Connection and Exchange Program projects keeps Caitlin and her team in our US office busy. She is constantly in touch with teachers throughout the country, keeping track of their projects and trying to find new opportunities.

Top: Caitlin (left) and Alexis Menten (right) at the first Teacher Professional Development workshop in Bangladesh, two years ago.

Middle: Right along side the LINC students, Caitlin digs like a pro.

Bottom: Caitlin watches the LINC football match with a young sports fan.



And please, don't forget to visit our website:

<http://www.connect-bangladesh.org/>

If you'd like to receive copies of this newsletter each month, send a letter to nasir@schoolsonline.org and let him know.

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